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ABSTRACT

Although shortages of certified special education teachers occur in both rural and urban areas, they are more critical in rural districts, where recruitment can be problematic and there are few special educators on staff. In response to chronic shortages in the state, the Utah State Office of Education created a critical personnel shortages committee to study the problem. A 1997-2000 study commissioned by the committee found that approximately 10 percent of Utah's special education teachers left the classroom each year, and many vacated positions were filled by unlicensed substitutes. The most common reason for leaving was "moved out of state." In 2001, a separate study looked at why Utah special education teachers transferred to regular education positions and their levels of satisfaction with their old and new positions. Survey respondents were generally satisfied or very satisfied with the teaching aspects of both their old and their new positions. Almost one-third of respondents listed love of teaching as the reason for transferring to regular education rather than pursuing a new career. On the other hand, teachers reported being frustrated and unhappy with the noninstructional aspects of special education, particularly paperwork. Teacher ratings are listed for factors that might have influenced them to remain in special education. (Contains 13 references.) (SV)

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A Qualified Special Educator for Every Student:

Why This Isn't Happening and What Can Be Done about It?

Lori Garnes, Ronda Menlove, and Elizabeth Adams

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RC 023 423

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A QUALIFIED SPECIAL EDUCATOR FOR EVERY STUDENT: WHY THIS ISN'T HAPPENING AND WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT?

Overview of the National Issues

Teacher shortages in the United States are the largest in the history of our country (Pipho, 1998). These shortages include all categories of special educators and are not limited to any specific geographic region (Billingsley, 1993; Boe, Cook, Bobbitt & Terhanian, 1998; Brownell & Smith, 1992). Shortages of special education professionals have been seen in rural and urban districts alike (Lauritzen & Friedman, 1993). In many cases, attrition of teachers in rural settings has been more significant because the loss of one special education teacher could put an entire small district in jeopardy (Thurston & Sebastian, 1996). In rural settings, which often have few special educators on staff, retention is a critical issue (Koury, Ludlow, & Weinke, 1991).

Rural Impact

Shortages of certified special education teachers are most critical in rural areas of the country (Koury, Ludlow, & Weinke, 1991). Although the total number of special education teachers needed in rural areas is not as large as the number in urban areas, filling these open teaching positions may be more problematic (Thurston & Sebastian, 1996). Rural special education teachers may be difficult to recruit and may not stay as long in their positions thus creating higher levels of attrition and greater continual demand for teachers in rural areas. In a survey of 158 rural special education teachers, Westling and Whitten (1996) found that only 57% of the special education teachers surveyed reported that they were likely to be in their current positions in 5 years.

Reasons why Utah special education teachers left their positions have been explored in a three-year study of special education attrition conducted by Utah State University. The causes and patterns of attrition in the rural state of Utah have been analyzed, giving valuable insight into how the loss of good special education teachers can be prevented.

An in-depth follow-up study looking specifically at special education teachers who transfer to regular education teaching positions was conducted as well. Findings indicate that one of the main reasons why special educators transfer to regular education is because they want to teach more and avoid the frustrations of paperwork.

By looking at the reasons why special education teachers are leaving their classroom positions, universities can better prepare teachers who have the skills needed to remain in a classroom. Administrators can develop strategies to provide teachers with the inservice and support necessary for good teachers to continue to teach (Adams, 2001).

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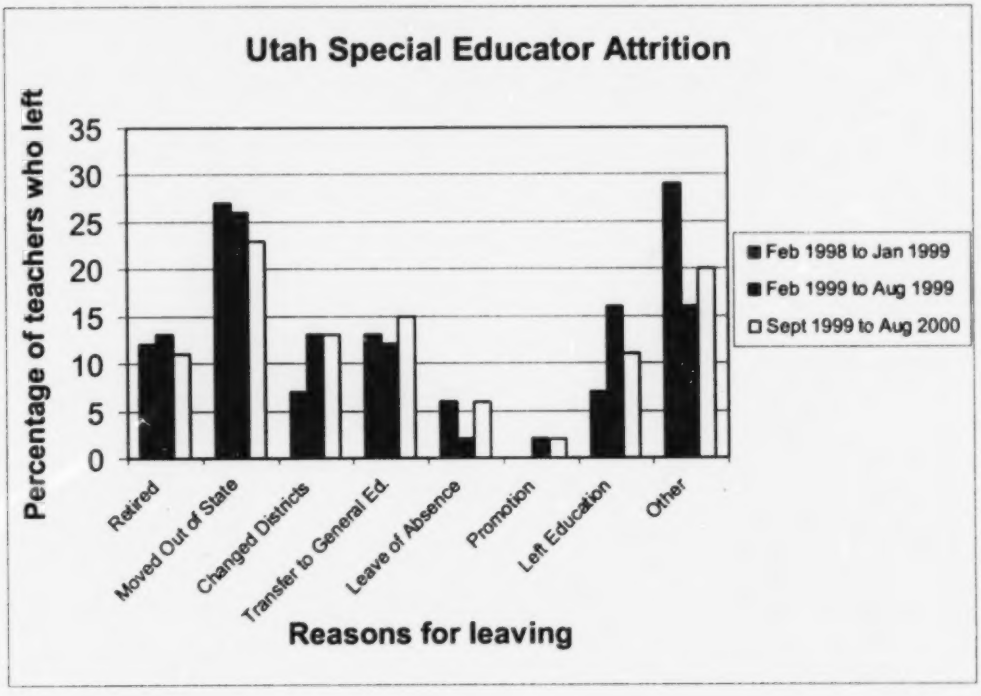
Scope of the Problem in Utah

Utah is experiencing critical special education teacher shortages in all areas of the state. In response to a long history of chronic shortages, the Utah State Office of Education (USOE) created a critical personnel shortages committee to study the problem. The committee is comprised of district special education directors, university special education faculty, and USOE staff. In a 1997-2000 study commissioned by the committee, researchers found that approximately 10% of the special education teachers working in Utah schools left the classroom each year (Adams, Menlove, & Salzberg, 2001). Many of these vacated special education teaching positions were filled with non-licensed "teachers." In some cases these "teachers" were long-term substitutes without college degrees or special education training. The Utah Attrition Study was conducted to determine the amount of attrition occurring in the state of Utah among special education personnel, and to find out the specific reasons why special education personnel are leaving. The most common reason for leaving listed by special education teachers and speech language pathologists was that they "moved out of state". Psychologists reported "retirement" and "moved out of state" as the two most common reasons for leaving positions (Adams, Menlove, & Salzberg, 2001). The next most common reason for leaving listed by all special education professionals was "other", which can include any number of personal reasons (Adams, Menlove, & Salzberg, 2001).



Special education teachers transferring to general education positions contribute to the shortages of special education teachers in Utah. In a separate study, Adams (2001) looked at the reasons Utah special education teachers transferred to regular education positions and the level of satisfaction these teachers reported in their general education positions. Survey results indicated that the respondents were somewhat to very dissatisfied with the non-instructional aspects associated with their special education position. These non-instructional aspects included paperwork, student discipline, support from others, class size, student placements, meetings, and legal issues.

While the respondents indicated that they were dissatisfied with the non-instructional aspects associated with their special education position, they did not feel this way about the non-instructional duties associated with their general education position. They were satisfied to very satisfied regarding the non-instructional duties of their

general education position. They were also satisfied to very satisfied with the instructional duties in both their special education and general education positions. In fact, almost one-third of the respondents listed love of teaching as the factor that influenced them to transfer to general education rather than pursing another career. The non-instructional aspects associated with special education play a significant role in influencing special education teachers' decisions to transfer to general education.

Level of Satisfaction with [redacted] Instructional and Noninstructional Aspects

Aspect	1 Very Satisfied	2 Satisfied	3 Somewhat Dissatisfied	4 Very dissatisfied
Instructional	22	20	8	1
	43%	39%	16%	2%
Noninstructional	3	9	15	24
	6%	18%	29%	47%

(Adams, 2001)

Level of Satisfaction with [redacted] Instructional and Noninstructional Aspects

Aspect	1 Very Satisfied	2 Satisfied	3 Somewhat Dissatisfied	4 Very Dissatisfied
Instructional	32	16	2	1
	63%	31%	4%	2%
Noninstructional	24	20	7	0
	47%	39%	14%	

(Adams, 2001)

The respondents in this study indicated that they wanted to teach, they enjoyed teaching, and were satisfied with the teaching aspects of education. However, teachers reported that they were frustrated and unhappy with the non-teaching aspects of special education, particularly paperwork. If the time and physical demands of the non-teaching aspects were reduced or eliminated, perhaps special education attrition may be reduced.

Factors that might have influenced the Teacher to Remain in Special Education

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage
Administrative factors			
	Assistance with paperwork	11	22%
	Additional teachers/aides	11	22%
	Better salary	10	20%
	Smaller caseload	7	14%
	Better/more materials/resources	5	10%
	Increase in time for non-teaching duties	4	8%
	Reduction in non-teaching duties	3	6%
	Position available	2	4%
	More space to work in	2	4%
	Parental training	1	2%
	Better mentor	1	2%
	Better supplemental services	1	2%
	Another placement	1	2%
	Additional training	1	2%
	More flexibility	1	2%
Support Factors			
	Appreciation/respect	6	12%
	District support	5	10%
	School collaboration	3	6%
	Admin/building support	2	4%
	Special education department support	1	2%
	Recognition/affiliation of teaching	1	2%
	Better IEP meetings/support	1	2%
Other teaching options			
	Other choices/opportunities	7	14%
Nothing would have influenced me to stay		6	12%

(Adams, 2001)

Potential Strategies which will Promote Retention of Special Educators

While special education professionals report that they like the teaching aspects of their jobs, they are burdened by the administrative functions of the job, in particular paper work (Adams, 2001). There are indications that support by principals and administrators can relieve much of this frustration (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001). Using technology and organizational skills may help manage the paperwork loads associated with the provision of special education services (CEC, 2001). Ongoing inservice training and continued education regarding best practices can also better prepare teachers to manage the stress of the special education classroom. Using mentoring or professional peer coaching activities may assist teachers to use skills learned through ongoing training in the classroom, thus minimizing frustration (Askvig, B. A. & Garnes, L., 2000). All of these strategies need to be fully explored in order to better meet the needs of special education professionals.

Conclusions

These data are helpful and allow university faculty and school administrators to better understand the issues of retaining qualified special education teachers in rural settings. This understanding could lead to the development of strategies, which would minimize attrition and promote retention of special education teachers.

If qualified special education teachers are not available in the classroom, children will not have access to high quality education. Considering variables and issues that lead to teacher attrition and reviewing factors that lead to teacher retention will impact the availability of appropriately qualified special education teachers in rural settings.

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